

## Species Profile: *Otopharynx lithobates* "Zimbabwe Rock"

It was a dark and stormy night.....well ok actually it was a pretty nice day with the sun shining back on the 28th of September 2004. My best friend and I took a trip down to Armke's where I purchased several species of cichlids, four of which being medium small *Otopharynx lithobates* "Zimbabwe Rock". My friend originally turned me on to these fish by showing me several pictures of nicely colored up males and that was all it took, I wanted some. Out of my original four I ended up getting two males and two females, however my dominant male developed bloat a month or two after I got them home and died. As sad as this was it actually turned out to be a blessing in disguise as the subdominant male quickly colored up and is by far a better looking fish than the other male could ever hoped of being.

Now with the other male out of the picture the once subdominant male is feeling as if he is king of the tank and is quickly wanting to breed with the two ladies in waiting. On November 17, 2004 just a little less than 2 months from time of purchase I came home for lunch to find a very exciting site in my tank. I walked into the house and as always I glance over at the tank, which is just to the right of the door, I come in through. As I looked at the tank I thought it funny that all the inhabitants of the tank were huddled up next to the glass on the far right side of the tank. Upon closer inspection I noticed that my male Litho was on the left side of the tank all alone moving some sand around next to one of the rocks. My curiosity and excitement was very peaked. As I watch I then noticed that one of the females would come over near the male as if to see what he is doing he would then promptly chase her all around the tank. After a few minutes of this my wife who had also come home for lunch was watching the tank with me and almost as excited as was.

The male litho now had dug out kind of a half moon hole up against the rock in the sand and would swim around in it keeping the area cleaned out. After that was done the female then came over and this time was not chased away but rather she went into the hole the male had made. The male now jittering up a storm they

begin circling and doing their "dance" as we called it. It was truly awesome watching the female dropping her eggs and turning around quickly to scoop them up into her mouth. The "dance" and whole process lasted probably 45 minutes to an hour and by the end the female had a full mouth of eggs and retreated back to the back of the aquarium behind some rocks and the other fish were allowed back to other parts of the tank.

The next day I looked into the tank and noticed that the other female litho was now hiding in the back of the tank. Upon further inspection I noticed that she now had a mouth full of eggs as well. This excited me, as this would be my first breeding if successful. I did a lot of reading online to find out more about how long they hold, how to strip, etc. One thing I missed was water temperature affecting hold times. I keep my tank at about 81-82 degrees and everything I had read was based on a tank temp of about 76. So with this mistake I figure I would let her hold for about 21 days or so then strip. Well at 17 days of holding on December 3rd, 2004 I come home from lunch and find that the first female that spawned spit her fry in the tank upon which the other fish had a quick tasty meal. After uttering some expletives I notice the other female was still holding. I quickly pulled the canopy and tops off the tank so as to catch her and strip her. I figured since she spawned just a day after the other female that I had better strip her before she too spit the fry out into the main tank.

I caught her fairly quickly and held her in the water with the net while my wife got me a cup of tank water and a stool. I put the stool next to the tank and me and put the cup of water on it so it would be about waist high. I had never stripped a fish before so I was a bit nervous. I pulled the net out of the tank and gently held the body of the fish with the net. I had her so that her head was poking out and I held her just over the water in the cup. So far so good however I ran into a little bit of a problem trying to open her mouth. I finally caught her bottom jaw with my fingernail and opened her mouth just as I did 3-4 small fry darted out and into the

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water in the cup, I then dipped her head with mouth open into the water and several more fry darted out. I did this a couple of more times and then got to worried that I might be keeping her out to long or hurting her so I decide that was enough and put her back into the main tank.

Looking in the cup I now have 11 baby lithos. I quickly dump them into a breeder net that I had setup on my 10 gallon shellie tank. I did miss a few that the female held onto but she spit them out into the main tank within a day or two of stripping the others. I was very glad that I went ahead and stripped this female as the fry she was holding were fully developed and didn't even have any of their egg sacks left so it wouldn't of been much longer before she spit them out naturally.

The fry I stripped into the breeder box all did great. I feed them crushed NLS and Cyclop-eeze both of which they gobbled up eagerly. At the time of this article the fry are now three months old and growing like weeds. I did loose one fry do to getting something stuck in his mouth but that was the only lose.

Now for a bit of technical info on *Otopharynx lithobates*. The *Otopharynx* genus consists of haplochromine fishes endemic to Lake Malawi, Africa. They are mostly very colorful, and similar in general appearance to the peacocks of the *Aulonocara* group. *Otopharynx* refers to a structure in the cranium, which is the differentiating feature of the genus. These fish have been in the hobby for quite some time, sold as the "Red Top *Aristochromis*". All *lithobates* females and juveniles have the same coloration, which is a brownish gold with three dark blotches running along the lateral line, and four smaller markings along the base of the dorsal. Males, depending on local population, become infused with varying shade of blue, with the lips and head turning first and a bright yellow blaze starting from the upper lip extending up the forehead and through the dorsal fin to the tail making for a very beautiful fish. I feed my fish a combination of NLS, Dainichi, frozen brine shrimp, and frozen mysis

shrimp. The water is a constant pH of 8.1 and I use no other conditioners other than Stress Coat and Melaflex as needed.

This being my first experience with this whole breeding thing I must say it was very enjoyable and exciting and since then I have stripped several more fish.

— by Ryan Robinson



Photo By Greg Steeves